Short-Circuit: A "Twin Peaks" System

An audiovisual essay and text dedicated to the system of light and communication in "Twin Peaks".

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The sixth entry in an on-going series of audiovisual essays by Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin.

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25 May 1991 - Lynch. I saw, a bit by chance, with S.P., an episode of *Twin Peaks* on TV. I had already seen one and been intrigued (in a good way). Same feeling yesterday. Same pleasure to let myself into the “chain” of the film, once I am (vaguely) related to the plot and once I am in the passage, always stimulating, from one scene (one shot) to another. Ah! Here’s some cinema, one notices. It constantly articulates something. —Serge Daney, *The Exercise Was Beneficial*, fragment translated by Laurent Kretschmar

Many things can be said *in general* about the entire *Twin Peaks* phenomenon masterminded by David Lynch and Mark Frost; its pertinent ‘macro’ contexts are many. These contexts include: the convoluted narrative and the crazy characters; the inauguration of a ‘dead girl’ genre (and where that genre has gone since the start of the 1990s, in *Top of the Lake* or *True Detective*); long-form TV drama, its possibilities and pitfalls; and the elaborate ‘cultish’ approaches to its viewing and interpretation developed by fans old and new. Then there is the especially rich mythological underpinning of *Twin Peaks* in all its extensions (including spin-off books, the feature *Fire Walk With Me*, and last year’s unveiled “Missing Pieces” shot for the latter)—both the mythology conjured by the series, which still holds so many in its thrall, and the many mythological systems from Judaeo-Christian to occult that feed into it.

Many of these paths (and others) will no doubt be explored in-depth by the participants at an upcoming conference at Salford University, Manchester, on 21 and 22 May: *I’ll See You Again in 25 Years: The Return of Twin Peaks and Generations of Cult TV*. In our contribution to this conference, we dwell more on the “micro” level of *Twin Peaks*, using audiovisual resources alongside the standard academic tools—to get to the heart of that particular, televisual “cinema of poetry” that Daney found so captivating.

On this micro-level, certain motifs circulate, sensations spark, textures are created. We

look (and listen) to isolate material clusters of elements, pockets of feeling, poetic configurations—constantly in motion across the total work, metamorphosing and transforming. For the cinema (or TV) of poetry—as Pier Paolo Pasolini well understood when he first investigated this term in 1965—is, at its best, never a matter of static, unchanging symbols that rise above the work and call for a “legend” or key (mythological or otherwise) to decipher them; rather, a good piece of audiovision (whatever the medium) invents its own systems, and sets them perpetually spinning.

So let’s dissolve the lure of *Twin Peaks*’s narrative intrigue, with its regime of mysteries and clues, questions and answers, at least for a while. Let’s follow, instead, something that happened by accident on set during the shooting of the pilot episode—a light fixture that didn’t work, flickering on and off—which then became a major motif in the entire scope of the series.

Flickering lights, sparks and short-circuits, on/off emissions, lightning, torches, complex strobing patterns, and less “motivated” effects that suggest the sudden overexposures created by photographic lighting or printing: light, for Lynch, is a privileged medium for or manifestation of that electrical energy which, as the critic Stéphane du Mesnildot has noted, he seems to “exalt” in an “almost mystical veneration” (*Cahiers du cinéma*, issue 703, September 2014).

This system of light gets attached, by poetic association, with the strange fate, and often the failure, of communication devices in the series. Most of these devices come in the form of resolutely old-fashioned technology, in line with the surreal, time-shifting nostalgia of the enterprise: telephones, radios, boxy old TV sets set to “snow”, big microphones, wires, speakers, earpieces, antennae.

Mechanical or artificial communication tends to go berserk in Lynch, creating every kind of auditory displacement and excess: screaming, sobbing, feedback, echo, static, distortion – as well as music that stops and starts, speeds up and slows down. Telephony is even married to an uncanny, mental telepathy in the *Twin Peaks* pilot, when people know what is to be told them before it is said, and even without it being said.

Light and communication, image and sound: is it any wonder that Daney noticed in *Twin Peaks* that spark of cinema which “constantly articulates something”?